

# *the Atlantic*

## Why Do People Sign Yearbooks?

Commemorative class books evolved from practical notebooks into collections of hair clippings, rhyming couplets, and “have a great summer” wishes.

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Yearbooks from J.E.B. Stuart High School in Falls Church, Virginia, from the 1970s (background) and 2000 (foreground) (Karen Kasmauski / Getty)

June 3, 2018

In 1635, the [first public school](#) in what would become the United States opened for classes. The Boston Latin School admitted only boys and focused on a humanities curriculum. The first “yearbooks” and their signatures can be traced back to the East Coast schools of the late 17th century, where people would sign scrapbook-style books containing hair clippings, dried flowers, newspaper articles, and other mementos of the school year.

Students would sign each other's books with little musings or poems, or stories to reminisce about the time spent together. The practice had evolved from [commonplace books](#), a Renaissance tradition of compiling important and memorable information into bound sheets of paper. Students were encouraged to keep the books during class, and eventually they became a place to store anything and everything their owners found interesting—including the signatures of other classmates.

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The 1806 class at Yale created the first known official bound yearbook with information about the school year, the students, and the faculty. It was called Profiles of Part of the Class Graduated at Yale College—and since permanent photographs wouldn't be invented for around 20 more years, this book included [printed silhouettes](#) of the students.

But you can thank the early American photographer [George K. Warren](#) for the yearbook as it exists today. Daguerreotypes and their easily tarnished silver plates lost popularity in the 1860s, and Warren needed a way to keep up his business. He turned to negatives, a process [invented in the 1830s](#) by William Henry Fox Talbot that evolved over the years to a point where Warren could print multiple images from one negative. He moved his career in a new direction, taking individual portraits and full class pictures, then selling those images to students who had them all bound into class yearbooks.

When photographs weren't available, student names were simply printed in a book, sometimes alongside drawings, and classmates would sign in the empty space. In other cases, like one from East St. Louis High School in 1914, the yearbooks would take on the original scrapbook style, full of mementos like pressed leaves.

Signatures in these early yearbooks were often lengthy and mainly focused on friendship and remembrance. Almost everyone in the East St. Louis yearbook, plus several compiled from Archive.org and submissions from Facebook and Twitter users, signed with a rhyming poem of some sort, like "Remember me early, remember me late, remember I am an old schoolmate" or "When the future is present, and the present is past, may the light of our friendship burn bright to the last." Many a signer wanted to be a link in someone's chain of friendship or a brick in their chimney of friends.

Faculty signatures were nearly as long as classmate signatures, but with an important difference: Not a single one signed with a personalized message. It was all excerpts from poems or plays, or quotes from philosophers. Then, in the early 1900s, faculty signatures mostly disappeared, only reappearing around the 1960s.

By the 1930s, signatures had begun to shorten in length. Classmates signed their names with brief messages, mostly variations of “best wishes” or “good luck.” Then, around 1935, an anti-signature revolution appeared to take place. Some yearbooks, like that of Philadelphia’s Simon Gratz High School, designated certain pages for faculty and classmate autographs, which they signed in a row with only their signatures. In Chicago and other Midwestern towns, students signed by their photos, leaving no notes or best wishes. This trend lasted until about 1940. There’s no good explanation of why this shift took place, but Depression-era ink shortages might offer a partial rationale. Students of the time could have put thrift over memory.

By 1943, New Jersey’s Bound Brook High School and Chicago’s Gage Park High School yearbooks were full of signatures and notes again, complete with little drawings that covered the pages of both. Including “swell” in your signature was the cool thing to do, a trend that finally started to taper off in the 1970s. If you were anything in high school in the 1940s and ’50s, it was definitely swell—a swell fellow, a swell gal, a swell kid, a swell good-looking kid, a swell little gal, a swell guy, the swellest guy—it was inescapable. The good-luck wishes that had appeared in yearbooks in the early ’30s made a comeback as well, sticking around through the late ’50s in various forms: good luck, best wishes, success to you, loads of luck, best of luck, lots of success. The two often combined, creating the epitome of yearbook signatures of these decades: “Best wishes for lots of luck and success to a swell gal,” someone scribbled in a 1947 yearbook from Mount Horeb High School in Wisconsin.

By the late 1940s, classmates had also begun to trumpet their grade level; nearly every signature had “a junior,” “a senior,” “a froshie,” or something similar just before the actual name. And nearly everyone commented (lightly) on the nature of the yearbook’s owner, telling them to “keep up that personality”—the predecessor signature to the “stay sweet” revolution that began to appear in the 1980s. The 1950s saw the last of the “gals” and “fellows,” but it also held fast to the supposed wholesome, middle-class, white American Christian values of the time, with many yearbook signatures including “God bless” in some form.

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Yearbook signatures witnessed a massive change in the 1960s and '70s. Free love was in full swing, and as a result, the word “love” itself appeared to lose its sacred quality. In previous years, it had been reserved solely for family and significant others, but signatures from the '60s onward made liberal use of the word. Everyone signed with “love” or “love ya,” even when they hardly knew the person who owned the yearbook. It wasn't uncommon to see notes starting with “I didn't know you that well” and ending with a declaration of love just before the signer's name. The staid “lucks” and “best wishes” all but disappeared, replaced by poems and rhymes that were at once silly and a little bit mean. For example: “When you are old and out of shape, remember that girdles are \$2.98.”

Variations on the “roses are red” poem overwhelmed yearbook signatures in those two decades, like these three smarmy ones from the 1970 class signature books of St. Symphorosa School in Chicago:

Roses are red, violets are blue, houses were built, but what happened to you?

Roses are red, violets are blue, when I take out the garbage, I think of you.

Roses are red, violets are blue, toilets were made for people like you.

Acronyms also emerged in these years, too, announcing URAQT (you are a cutie) and that the signer is AFA (a friend always). Ingenuity in signature layout started appearing as well, with one squiggly line of text running all around a page and surrounding other notes, or a signature masquerading as math:

2 Cute

2 Be

4gotten

These clever acronyms were just a warm-up for the swarm that arrived in the 1980s and stayed for good. Today's yearbooks have many of these old standards: KIT (keep in touch), RHTS (raise hell this summer), FF (friends forever, which evolved to BFF in 1996, according to the Oxford English Dictionary), LYLAS (love ya like a sister), SWAK (sealed with a kiss), HAGS (have a great summer), HAKAS (have a kick-ass summer), N-E-WAZ (anyways). One that thankfully didn't survive, likely due to the discriminatory tone, was the early-1990s take “love you DNQ” —dearly, not queerly.

By the late '90s, several other perennial favorites began to grace signature pages in yearbooks around the country. There was always “the first to sign your crack,” written on the spine between pages; everyone wanted to know “wuz ^”

(what's up) but also wanted you to know NMH (not much here); and by the way, your friend would also "c-ya next year." Oh, and so-and-so was there, at a very specific spot indicated by an arrow. And don't forget to save your yearbook, because someday, "my signature will be worth a lot of money."

Yearbook signatures in the early 2000s were an exercise in technology. By 1999, nearly everyone left a phone number, with the now-standard KIT or C/M (call me) — even though hardly anyone really meant it. In 2000 and 2001, email addresses and pager numbers joined the ranks, followed by screen names, text speak, and Facebook references in 2008.

The most recent yearbooks seem to have dispensed with much of the silliness from previous decades, instead morphing into something more personal: longer, meaningful letters to let friends know the person signing truly cares. This was likely due in part to the evolution of mobile technology; friends are now able to connect 24/7, so perhaps yearbook signatures have become a way to show someone how you feel outside of Instagram or Snapchat. But hey, KIT. Surely HAPS will make a triumphant return in years to come.